

Motivating EFL Learners

By Ignacio Lopez Corria

Motivation is one of the most important factors in language learning, which is why teachers of English as a Foreign Language have always tried to find new approaches or strategies that introduce practical uses of EFL in the classroom. Unfortunately, many students dislike learning English; and although they attend lessons, they are not interested in speaking properly. They only want to pass the compulsory exams.

Finding the students' likes and dislikes concerning EFL learning and applying new teaching techniques to improve the command of language use have been major goals. Surveys conducted with learners and teachers at the School of Nursing in Holguin have focused on finding out why students reject learning foreign languages. The results showed that most of the second- and third-year students in the nursing career did not like studying English because they did not find any relation between English and their own careers. They did not think that English would be useful in their future jobs; they felt that they spent too much time learning boring, unpleasant, and difficult things.

In Cuba, the Kernel Series books are used to teach General English to nursing career students from the first to third years. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is taught to students in the fourth year. Surprisingly, data showed that ESP learners liked studying EFL, while the ones studying in General English disliked it.

A New Approach

A few years ago, a new teaching strategy was introduced in some nursing student groups. This technique consisted of interrelating English and the students' careers. So, General English began including such items as situations, expressions, phrases, and terms which were part of the contents that learners were studying in their specialties. In other words, General English in this school now adds specific nursing-related language chunks into those general themes appearing in the Kernel Series.

The purpose is to allow learners to behave as if they are using the language to communicate their own experiences about their lives and careers. They talk about topics they are interested in and like. For instance, students are taught the steps in giving an injection and in treating a septic wound. They also learn parts of the body, terms for the most commonly used medical instruments and devices, as well as nursing care and nursing intervention vocabulary.

Aside from vocabulary activities, many activities were added to improve the students' interest learning English. Lessons included meaningful situations: language games to establish patterns, contests to gauge the students' language mastery, assignments to talk about things related to their own experiences, comments about love, and so forth. The students were also encouraged to talk about exciting topics at precise times or whenever they felt motivated. They could talk about things that had really happened to them.

Some of these activities were developed incidentally, and others were inserted into the school syllabus. Specific changes were made to eliminate uninteresting activities and topics. For example, sections of the Kernel Series were substituted by exercises related to the students' specialties.

Enriching Activities

To enhance the English classroom atmosphere and encourage learning, advertisements, warnings, posters, bulletin boards, pictures, puppets, drawings, and photos are posted on the walls. The students are surrounded by items that resemble the culture of the target language and that give learners the feeling of "learning the language."

Because music also increases motivation and learning, teachers play it when learners are tired, bored, or discouraged. The selection of music reflects the culture of the English-speaking countries.

While students listen to songs, they complete comprehension exercises. First, they attempt to state the topic of the song, and they try to write down the words. Later, an exercise with some words of the song missing is given out to the learners. If they cannot do it, they may ask for help. When they have completed this exercise, the song is played again and sung several times.

The whole class is told that a song will be played and discussed at a given time and that everybody is invited to participate, but learners' attendance is voluntary. The students who participate are those who are really interested in learning a song or those who like to sing. Later on, they can sing the song in their spare time while others listen.

Local or international news is given to the class in the target language. It is much better if the learners already know the information or at least the headlines in their mother tongue, because it is possible then to introduce some lexical items whose meanings may be inferred from the context. The headlines are expanded as students express their opinions.

Films also are viewed and later discussed in class. Questions are used to stimulate debates. This encourages students to express their thoughts about the films. They also have the chance to talk about the film stars they like most.

It is always very useful to have learners use English when they ask about something they do not understand, they do not know, or they want to know. It is important also to avoid such language barriers as presenting things that are too difficult for the learners; having activities that are too long without any methodological variation; and giving exams that are too demanding.

Learners are not encouraged to use the mother tongue to communicate in class. The native language is only used to introduce specific lexical terms or grammatical patterns. Those students who use English fluently and often to express their ideas or opinions are exempted from doing any of the exams as a way of rewarding them.

Conclusion

Fortunately, interrelating the teaching of English and the learner's own specialty and using other motivating techniques have been very successful. The results of using these new strategies have shown that students know much more English and have been able to acquire more skills.

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